

ABOUT MUSIC – By Mariss McTucker

Little Jane and the Pistol Whips: *Each Little Note*

Recorded, mixed, and produced by Fred Baker at Electric Peak Recording, Gardiner, MT; mastered by Jim DeMain at YesMaster, Nashville, TN, 2013

Montana native and Livingston songwriter/guitarist Ashly J. Holland and her band have put out another winner in this nine-song effort of refreshing country music.

Sparse and well produced, it features Tom Murphy, mandolin and background vocals, and Tony Polecastro, banjo, Dobro, and vocals (“You and I Fit”). Pistol Whip Jamey Warren plays bass when the band is live.

As usual, Holland wrote all the songs; they are so accessible that any number of country artists could record them tomorrow. And her voice has that pure and vibrant quality that the music demands.

“Small Town Girl” strolls softly in, a country loper. Murphy provides stellar background vocals on this and others, nuances of Emmylou Harris/Herb Pedersen vocal harmonies back in the day. Soft banjo cushions “Simone, Simone,” with another great harmony from Murphy. (“Please don’t frighten me. I’m not the one who killed you, love. I cannot set you free.”)

“Hey, Hey, Hey” is a quick bluegrassier that rocks along with crisp mandolin and the fleet-fingered bent notes of the Dobro. Holland intones, “I pray, pray, God lets me keep you just one more day,” into the catchy refrain. “I would shout it from the highest peak, I would whisper it to you, my sweet, my sweet, my sweet, my sweet.”

Holland’s hooks are simple, universal; they don’t seem to draw lots of attention – but they work perfectly. That’s part of what makes a good songwriter. The repetitive refrain is spot-on to keep this one clicking, with smokin’ leads traded by mando and Dobro. Sweet, definitely!

Enter the gossamer strains of Dobro in an aching love song, “So Slowly.” It’s Patsy Cline all over the place, dripping with creamy mandolin tremolo and some Dolly trills thrown in from Holland’s excellent pipes.

The last number is an unabashed love song, a vocal duet with Polecastro. Holland admits some of the songs here are written “with the tones of love and happiness (not something I usually write about).” Good for her!

Visit www.littlejaneandthepistolwhips.com.



Wylie and the Wild West: *Sky Tones: Songs of Montana*

Engineered by Mark Thornton and Larry Marrs, mixed by Marrs, recorded at Sidekick Sound Studios, and produced by Wylie Gustafson, Nashville, TN, 2012

With his new CD, one of Montana’s most prolific songwriters and “a simple cow-horse man from the Big Sky Country” has given us a treasure-trove of the songs about Montana that he’s recorded over his career.

Re-recorded and produced by the same crew in Nashville responsible for last year’s gem, *Rocketbuster*, and featuring a slew of the same pickers, this compilation is vintage Wylie Gustafson.

The studio musicians include Dennis Crouch, bass, John McTigue, drums, Mark Thornton, guitar, Robby Turner, steel, Jeff Taylor, accordion, and Larry Marrs, background vocals.

The CD has a cross-section of what the native son describes as tunes about the “beauty of such a stunning land and the charm of her characters.” Possessing a spiritual love for his state and unabashedly crooning about it is Wylie’s forte; it doesn’t hurt that the Yodel King packs the musical muscle to pull it off in grand style.

Nuggets abound, from ballads to snappy dancers and back again. There’s the boogie-fied “Buck Up and Huck It”; the swiny and shuffly “M-m-m Montana”; the Bob Wills-inspired “Whoop Up Trail” (“ridin’, ropin’, lopin’, laughin...”), featuring some tasty yodeling; and don’t forget “Yodeling Fool,” from 1993’s *Wylie and the Wild West Show* recording.

You got your “Hi-Line Polka” and its rockin’ rhythm (“yeah, you betcha”), and the sweet waltz, “Ridin’ the Hi-Line.” The boy from Conrad never forgets his roots, and neither will you when you listen to this collection.

Visit the artist at www.wyliewebsite.com.

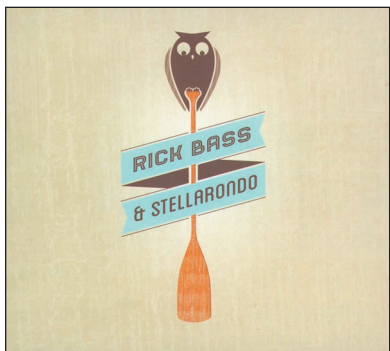


Rick Bass and Stellarondo

Recorded live by engineers Adam Selzer and John Askew at Type Foundry, Portland, OR; produced by Caroline Keys and Rick Bass, 2012

This ambitious self-titled album, the brainchild of Missoula guitarist and composer Caroline Keys and her folk orchestra Stellarondo, marries music to the words of noted Yaak author Rick Bass. It was born out of a conversation the band had on a long trip to record in Portland; when they mentioned the idea to their friend Bass, who was to write liner notes for that recording; he became intrigued, and the idea took flight.

There are three short stories and one essay here, featuring Stellarondo members Keys on resonator, kalimba, banjo, and guitar; Travis Yost on double bass, snare and bass drums; Bethany Joyce on Wurlitzer, cello and saw; and Gibson



Hartwell, guitar, pedal steel, octave mandolin, and railway junk (yep). Several contribute “noise,” as well.

Bass provides the spoken words and Stellarondo makes his imaginings manifest. The author’s tales are epic journeys that continually unfold, leading us hither and yon, all the while clinging to that thread of total believability. His tightly-written tales are so visual they need no accompaniment, yet Stellarondo has given the listener a new perspective – a storyboard for the mind.

The first number, “Canoeists,” opens with the flowing sustain of an arpeggio, a waltz that relaxes into the words of Bass as it fades into the whisper of a guitar chord. Bass speaks in a rush, setting the scene of two young lovers on a canoe trip, not knowing where the day will take them. They paddle, swim, and relax in the sun, drinking in nature, “... unconcerned by notions or constraints of time, and the amount of water that had passed by ...” A soft cello and guitar line ushers the piece into the evening.

“The Bear” begins with what could be the prelude to a k.d. lang song, with its cool ’60s country-soft, pedal-steel backdrop. Helen is a dying old woman, isolated in the woods, whose only companion is a huge black bear that frequents her surroundings; she feeds it and dreams about it. We hear quiet musical tones, hardly audible. Enter tingly, whispery guitar strains that morph into the slowly rumbling train sound of a double-bass, rising up, as Bass declaims, “the bear ... appeared so gradually, so slowly, blackness appearing from out of blackness ... moving so carefully, so stealthily, as to seem like a man in a costume of a bear ...”

This is but a smattering of the musical wordplay going on during this unique contribution to the spoken-word genre. Visit stellarondo.com for more information.

Bob Phillips: *Rough Road Rebel*

Recorded and produced by Dory Ritrovato at Ghetto Recording, Butte, MT

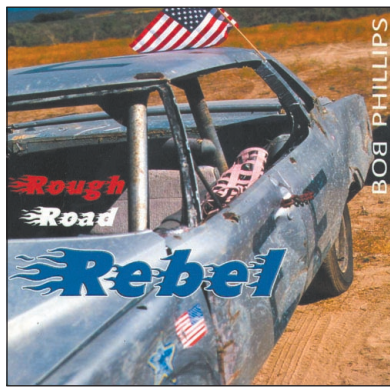
Montana-born-and-raised, Bob Phillips has a new CD out, singing and playing guitar on 12 originals in the contemporary-folk vein. The writer and troubadour, who worked at various newspapers (and at *Lively Times* for eight years) now lives in Utah and places West. With his rich baritone and simple guitar style, he suffuses his commentaries on life with emotion, a trembly vibrato adding to the ambience.

“Out on the Backroads” comes first, with wolf howls and a spooky sensibility, minor-infused. “I’m no one on the road to nowhere, that’s my motto; my name’s a thing I carry like an old and heavy load,” he intones.

Ever the perceptive journalist, Phillips takes on the movie culture in “Disneyland Dreamin’,” with its seemingly innocent, countrified sound. He takes us to visit Mickey and Minnie, and to taste the carefree, wealthy Hollywood life we all imagine. Yet Phillips takes the lifestyle to task, and the unfeeling culture it creates. “Sometimes I think that blood runs green; it’s the color of money, if you know what I mean.”

Butte, where Phillips lived for a time, gets a storyline of its own, as he tells the tale of a down-and-out soul in “Hard Rock Bottom Town.” “It was me who dug the dirt that always drug me down,” he sings, spitting out “In Butte” like an epithet.

“Paper Boy” is a catharsis of sorts, a recounting of being the “token male” at an office; “Freedom” is slow and sad; and “Home” is an expression of living in the now, searching for peace and stability, something we all crave, and strive for. We are indebted to those who articulate it well.



Dbrunkho: *Songs of the Boneyard*

Recorded and produced by Dan Brunkhorst at Reverse 4 Z Studios, Lewistown, MT, 2012

What an apt title for the new CD from Lewistown percussionist Dan Brunkhorst. It’s spooky and unsettling. He achieves that ambience by manipulating a slew of instruments here: alto and bass clarinets, saxophone, harmonica, guitar, piano/keys, synthesizer, vibraphone and hubcaphone (!), marimba, gong tree, drums, and bowls.

Clearly, Brunkhorst makes a lot of his own instruments. For example, the gong tree is made from plow discs, and the hubcaphone is his own version of Henry Threadgill’s creation.

The album is a hearty soup of experimental sounds, all disquieting yet strangely compelling. The composer uses a synthesizer to filter animal and bird sounds native to Montana, along with notes made by conventional instruments to create improvisational jazz in the tradition of Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy, among others.

His 10 originals start with “Circular,” with its percussive plops and sax honks underlain by squiggly drums, building to a spazzy crescendo. “Year of the Rabbit” enters snakelike, with a gurgling sax that sounds like it’s trapped in a bottle; the buzzing-bee sax gets loose on “Red into Blue.”

The compositions are not so much heard by the ears as by the imagination. The crazy mix of sounds evoke scenes in the mind: a xylophone butterfly, maybe, in “Ambervision”; the hypnotic rustling of an aviary, bell-like yet ominous, of “Level III.” “A Goose Keeps Formation through the Fog” is atmospheric.

Some of the compositions seem to evoke conversations – the questioning, tip-toeing sax and the imploring piano of “Buzzkillers”; the mooing, buzzing phrases of “Lazers.” “Frost Free” sounds as if wind chimes are softly blowing, portending the approach of a summer storm.

Brunkhorst channels his imagination through his instruments here, and a wild one it is.

Visit www.myspace.com/dbrunkho.



9

State of the Arts welcomes CDs

State of the Arts welcomes CD submissions by Montana musicians for inclusion in the About Music section. The recordings must be professional, commercially available, full-length CDs, with cover art and liner notes. Brief biographical information on band members would be helpful to the writer.

Please send submissions to either the Montana Arts Council, PO Box 202201, Helena, MT, 59620; or *Lively Times*, 33651 Eagle Pass Trl., Charlo, MT 59824.